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ABSTRACT

In spring 1997, a study was conducted to examine whether institutional contact with the student (in the form of a retention award) has a positive effect on student persistence. An experimental design was used to conduct the study. A sample of students was drawn based on their academic performance in Spring 1996. First-time students with long-term educational goals who completed three or more units with a Grade Point Average (GPA) of 2.0 or higher and received no "Withdrawal" grades were considered eligible for the retention award. A treatment group was randomly selected from the eligible students to receive the mailing, which included a retention award and a student satisfaction survey. Results included the following: (1) the persistence rate for treatment cases was 48.2%, while the persistence rate for the control group was 51.8%; (2) when examining the rates of student persistence, no significant differences existed for the treatment and control groups for gender, age, or ethnic group; (3) there were no significant findings for students based on their GPAs, units taken, or whether they were concurrently enrolled at a local university; and (4) it was found that human interaction might perform a stronger integrative function, and possibly address student concerns, more significantly than a certificate. (HAA)

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Retention Awards:

Are They An Effective Means of Retaining Students?

A paper presented at the 35th Annual Conference of the

Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

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Abstract

This study examines whether institutional contact with the student (in the form of a retention award) has a positive effect on student persistence. An experimental design was used to conduct the study. The treatment group received a written form of institutional contact, while the control group did not. The treatment did not have a significant effect on retention.

Literature Review

Student departure from institutions of higher education has been one of the most widely studied areas in higher education. Much of the recent work in this area has been guided by theoretical frameworks which view voluntary departure as the result of a complex interaction of individual and environmental influences (c.f. Tinto 1975, 1986, 1987, 1993; Bean 1980, Metzner and Bean 1987, Spady 1970, 1971). From the considerable amount of research generated by these models, it is clear that students who have greater levels of integration, or involvement, in their social and academic environments are less likely to voluntarily leave their academic institution (c.f. Pascarella and Chapman 1983, Pascarella et. al. 1983, Terenzini and Pascarella 1980). What is less widely researched, however, is the integration process itself. Terenzini (1994, p.58) observes "Surprisingly, ... little research has been done on the personal and organizational mechanisms and processes by means of which students become involved [in their college environments]."

In his discussion of the roots of departure, Tinto (1993) describes four types of student-institution mismatch situations that can result in departure: 1) adjustment - adjusting to the social and intellectual challenges of the college environment; 2) difficulty - problems meeting academic standards; 3) incongruence - individuals see integration with the institution as undesirable; and 4) isolation - lack of sufficient contact with college communities. To remedy

such mismatches, institutions have generally developed programs with face-to-face interaction as the means for involving students in their college environment. Nevertheless, given the tightening fiscal budgets in higher education institutions coupled with the rapidly expanding use of distance education, there may be fewer opportunities for direct contact between students and teachers. This raises the issue of whether or not other forms of contact between students and their environment can enhance integration and student persistence. The present work examines the effectiveness of a simple, low cost, method for reducing student attrition due to incongruence and isolation mismatches. In the Summer of 1996, students received a mailing congratulating them on a successful academic performance and were asked to respond to a short student satisfaction survey. The design and analysis of this experiment are discussed below.

Research Design

A sample of students was drawn based on their academic performance in Spring 1996. First-time students with long-term educational goals who completed three or more units with a GPA of 2.0 or higher and received no "W" grades were considered eligible for the retention award (n=664). A treatment group (n=332) was randomly selected from the eligible students to receive the mailing which included a retention award and a student satisfaction questionnaire. The students were given about two weeks to return the survey. After this two week time, those subjects who had not responded were sent another survey and a letter asking them again to complete the survey and return it to the college. This type of survey and follow-up yielded an overall response rate of 50%. Table 1 compares the sample with the school population. The sample closely correspond to the population for the selected variable measures.

Table 1. Demographic Comparisons of Sample and Population.

	Sample Percent (n=664)	Population Percent (n=20090)
Ethnic Group		
White	50.5	51.8
Black	10.5	11.1
Hispanic	21.4	23.5
Asian	12.1	9.5
Other	5.6	4.1
Age Group		
24 or younger	50.6	52.3
25 or older	49.4	47.7
Gender		
Female	57.8	58.9
Male	42.2	41.1
Disabled Student?		
No	98.3	97.7
Yes	1.7	2.3

Students were randomly selected to treatment and control groups. Students in the treatment group were sent a Retention Award. Control group members did not receive the award. The Retention award itself was a document that had the student's name prominently displayed at its top and congratulated the student for his / her successful completion of the semester. It also indicated that the institution was "proud of [his / her] accomplishment and wishes [him / her] continued success ...."

Measurement

Successful persistence is defined in this study as a student who was enrolled in the Spring 1996 semester and then re-enrolled in the subsequent Fall 1996 semester. Included with the retention award was a student survey to assess student perception after their first survey. (The survey instrument is included in Appendix A.) Survey items included questions about the

registration process, faculty interactions, the efficacy of student services, and a variety of other questions regarding student's college experiences. This survey also included a question asking whether the student was planning to enroll in RCC in the next semester. If a respondent was *not* planning to attend RCC in the next year, this student was asked to describe why they had decided not to re-enroll from a list of options.

Results and Data Analysis

To answer the question of whether retention award students returned at a higher rate, the persistence of the treatment and control groups were compared. The persistence rate for treatment cases was 48.2%, while the persistence rate for the control group was 51.8%. The difference in persistence rates was not statistically significant. When examining the rates of student persistence, no significant differences existed for the treatment and control groups for gender, age or ethnic group (see Table 2).

Further analysis did not yield significant findings for students based on their grade point averages, units taken or whether they were concurrently enrolled at a local university. Additionally, follow-up telephone interviews with a selected subsample of the treatment group reaffirmed the initial findings that the award did not have a significant effect on student persistence.

Different competing explanations can account for the lack of significant retention statistics. First, this treatment attempts to effect change in student behavior through the use of a retention award. However, RCC institutional logistics prevented the students' previous semester grades from being known until approximately four weeks before the start of the new

Table 2. Persistence Rate Comparisons of Treatment and Control Groups.

	N	Treatment	Control
Overall	**664**	48.2	51.8
Ethnic Group			
White	333	48.0	52.0
Black	69	45.5	54.5
Hispanic	141	44.0	56.0
Asian	80	53.3	46.7
Other	37	57.1	42.9
Age Group			
24 or younger	336	48.9	51.1
25 or older	328	47.6	52.4
Gender			
Female	384	46.8	53.2
Male	280	50.3	49.7
Disabled Student?			
No	653	47.8	52.2
Yes	11	71.4	28.6

semester. This meant that the retention awards most likely did not reach the subjects until three weeks before school. It could be argued that by the time the student received the award, they had already made decisions about whether to attend RCC in the upcoming term. Future treatments of this nature need to be undertaken earlier, when the student is more likely to be in the decision-making process of determining whether or not to re-enroll.

Second, the type of student interaction could be more meaningful than a mailed certificate. Human interaction (via phone call, face-to-face meeting, mentoring, etc.) might perform a stronger integrative function, and possibly address student concerns, more significantly than a certificate.

Another explanation that could explain the lack of any significant differences is that this study examined persistence from Spring to the subsequent Fall semester. Fall to Spring student persistence, usually a higher rate, should be studied in the future to determine whether this change would contribute to significant group differences.

The effectiveness of this type of treatment might also be limited to students who have particular educational needs. Specifically, this award might be more effective on students who are more prone to voluntary withdrawal. Future studies need to address this concern by offering the award to specific student subpopulations (basic skills students, first generation students, etc.) to determine whether the award aids in their persistence.

However, the primary strength of this study is its methodological design. Institutional research often does not employ the classic experimental design. In this project, treatment and control groups were randomly assigned so that causal effects of the treatment could be determined. It is clear that (in its current configuration) the retention award does not have a significant effect on student persistence. When the goal of a treatment is as significant as student persistence, the school's concern may need to be shown with more than just a certificate mailed to a student. Future research should address the effect of human contact as a mediating factor in semester-to-semester persistence.

APPENDIX A. RETENTION AWARD SURVEY INSTRUMENT.

July 19, 1996

[student identifier here]

Congratulations on receiving a retention award from Riverside Community College. To help the college better serve you, and other students, we would appreciate your response to the following statements. Please return your completed survey in the enclosed postage paid envelope by **August 5, 1996**.

Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements about your academic experience:

Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	
			I am satisfied with the financial aid I have received at RCC.
			The registration process is too difficult.
			Classes were not available at the times and days I could take them.
			The classes I wanted to take were not offered.
			Courses at RCC were too difficult.
			I received the correct placement advice for my English class.
			I received the correct placement advice for my math class.
			I received the academic counseling help I needed.
			The tutorial center provided the assistance I needed.
			The library was open when I needed to use it.
			The computer lab was not available at convenient times for me.
			I was satisfied with the quality of classes at RCC.
			I felt that my knowledge and experiences were valued by instructors.
			I felt comfortable asking questions in classes at RCC.
			Campus child care would have made it easier for me to take classes.
			I was satisfied with the mentoring I received from faculty.
			I knew an RCC instructor or staff member who cared about my success.
			I was satisfied with the availability of health care services at RCC.

Yes	No	
		Did you attend the orientation session at RCC prior to enrolling?
		Would you like to receive enrollment information and special assistance?
		Do you plan to enroll at Riverside Community College next semester?

If you are *not* planning to attend RCC next semester, which of the following factors influenced your decision not to come back to RCC? ***(please check all that apply)***

— increased demands at work
— increased demands at home
— classes not available at times and days needed
— counseling not available in order to choose classes
— RCC does not offer major /program I want to take
— could not afford to attend
— transfer to another college
— relocating / moving away from the area
— Other
please specify _____

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